

Voiceless Belonging: A Subaltern Study of Marginal Identity and Silent Resistance in Annie Zaidi's Prelude to a Riot

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Abstract

Annie Zaidi's novel *Prelude to a Riot* explores the unspoken tensions and fears simmering beneath the surface of a communally volatile society. Through a mosaic of interior monologues from characters of varying backgrounds, Zaidi deftly portrays how marginalized voices resist communal politics not through overt action, but through subtle forms of silence, hesitation, and disavowal. This paper examines the novel through the lens of subaltern studies and intersectional feminist theory to explore how religious minorities, women, and socioeconomically disenfranchised individuals are rendered voiceless in dominant political discourses. It argues that silence in the novel becomes both a symptom of oppression and a strategy of resistance. The study also examines how Zaidi critiques the ideological apparatus of religious majoritarianism and gendered nationalism by providing narrative space for internalized fear and suppressed identity. *Prelude to a Riot* emerges as a contemporary protest text that dismantles monologic nationalism and reveals the quiet defiance of the subaltern.

Keywords: Subaltern, Silence, Identity, Religious Nationalism, Marginalization.

Introduction

Set in an unnamed town in South India, Annie Zaidi's *Prelude to a Riot* (2020) offers a chilling portrait of communal disintegration, where anxiety and alienation gradually consume an entire society. Structured as a series of monologues, the novel avoids traditional narrative forms to enhance the fragmented voices of characters marginalized by religion, class, gender, and caste. In this tense environment, Zaidi examines how silence and repressed fears reflect a deep-rooted sense of not belonging voicelessness caused by the dominant ideologies of majoritarian politics and capitalist-patriarchal systems. This paper suggests that Zaidi's novel portrays the experiences of subaltern figures whose quiet dissent serves as a form of resistance. The characters' voices come together to depict a collective trauma, both national and personal, political and intimate.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative analytical approach informed by postcolonial subaltern studies and feminist literary criticism. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), as well as Ranajit Guha's formulations on historical silence and peasant resistance, the paper interprets Zaidi's text as a literary intervention into dominant narratives of nationalism. It also employs

intersectionality, as theorized by Kimberlé Crenshaw, to unpack the layered experiences of women, Muslims, and lower-class laborers in the novel. Through a close reading of selected monologues, particularly those of Fareeda, Appa, Rekha, and Girish, the study analyzes how structural silences and acts of omission serve as rhetorical strategies to expose marginalization. The Fragmented Voices of the Subaltern

Prelude to a Riot opens not with an explosion of violence but with an atmosphere of suppressed dread. The monologue form functions as a metaphor for the individual isolation of each character and their inability to communicate across lines of community, gender, or class. Characters like Fareeda, a Muslim woman who lives under constant scrutiny and is acutely aware of her vulnerability, epitomize the subaltern condition. She reflects: “We keep to ourselves. We try not to look like a threat. We pretend not to notice things. We don’t talk” (Zaidi 27). Her silence is not born of ignorance or passivity, but of a deep awareness that speaking out may invite violence.

Appa, a patriarchal landowner and staunch supporter of Hindutva ideology, represents the voice of the dominant. His nostalgia for “purity,” control, and tradition exposes the mechanisms of exclusion that fuel communal anxiety. In contrast, Girish, a young man caught between privilege and guilt, articulates the helplessness of those who witness systemic injustice but lack the courage to challenge it directly. His vacillating internal dialogue reflects the tension between complicity and awareness.

Gendered Silences and the Politics of Belonging:

Women’s voices in the novel are marked by internalized fear and restrained agency. Rekha, who desires to love freely across religious lines, is trapped by the constraints of family honor and societal surveillance. Her silence is not mere submission; it is a defense mechanism against a society that weaponizes women’s choices as symbols of cultural purity. Zaidi captures this double marginalization by presenting Rekha’s voice in lyrical fragments that resist coherence, symbolizing the impossibility of full expression for subaltern women.

Fareeda, meanwhile, serves as the narrative’s moral center. Her cautious words and measured tone reveal the exhausting labor of self-policing required of a Muslim woman in a polarized world. She observes, “We try to be invisible, but even invisibility has weight” (Zaidi 55). This paradoxical burden illustrates how marginalization operates not through physical removal but through psychological suppression. Religion, Nationalism, and the Manufactured ‘Other’ Zaidi’s novel offers a sharp critique of the Hindu nationalist mindset that aims to standardize identities and vilify differences. The unnamed town serves as a microcosm of India, where religious majoritarianism appears in subtle ways curfews, rumors, alterations in curriculum, coded language, all ultimately leading to violence. The novel doesn’t show the riot itself but rather the build-up, the gradual acceptance of hate, the conditioning to remain silent, and the weakening of empathy.

Characters like Dada and Appa serve as ideological architects who rationalize exclusion and incite fear under the guise of tradition and security. Their monologues are devoid of introspection, standing in sharp contrast to the fragmented and questioning tones of the marginalized characters. This dichotomy reveals the asymmetry of power and the role of Discourse in manufacturing the ‘Other’:

Results and Discussion

Zaidi’s Prelude to a Riot constructs a powerful counter-narrative that centers the experiences of those pushed to the margins of socio-political discourse. Through fragmented monologues, the novel resists

linear storytelling and instead evokes a fractured reality shaped by fear and isolation. The voices of Muslim characters, women, and economically vulnerable individuals offer a palimpsest of trauma, memory, and resistance. Their silence becomes a form of political speech, one that subverts dominant narratives without engaging in open confrontation.

The novel also suggests that belonging in a nationalist society is contingent upon conformity religious, linguistic, gendered, and behavioral. Those who deviate from this template are rendered voiceless. However, by giving them narrative space, Zaidi restores a measure of dignity and power to their experiences.

Conclusion

Annie Zaidi's *Prelude to a Riot* stands as a contemporary subaltern text that captures the creeping authoritarianism of communal majoritarianism through a chorus of suppressed voices. The novel demonstrates that silence can be both a symptom of oppression and a medium of dissent. Through the lens of subaltern studies and feminist theory, this paper has shown how Zaidi unearths the quiet desperation and subtle resistance of those excluded from hegemonic nationalism. In doing so, she not only critiques the present political climate but also calls for a more empathetic and inclusive understanding of identity, belonging, and resistance.

Works Cited

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